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“What in the world am I going to do about the holidays? There’s so much to do, and I have so little energy. My heart is broken. How am I going to survive this?”

Marsha, who lost her husband

“Christmas is coming. What am I supposed to do? She did almost all of it before. I feel so lost. I just want to run and hide.”

Stephen, who lost his wife

“I feel lost. It’s like I don’t know who I am now. I can’t even stand looking at family photos.”

Jennifer, who lost her daughter

Losing a loved one is painful. Life will never be the same. How could it be?
And if this wasn’t hard enough, the holidays are bearing down upon you. What in the world are you supposed to do?

You need a *grief survival kit designed for the holidays*. That’s why I wrote this book.

As a hospice chaplain, I’ve had the honor of walking with thousands of hurting people through deep, dark valleys of grief. I’ve listened to and observed them on this rocky and emotionally power-packed journey. From my personal grief experiences and theirs, I’ve gathered some tools that can help you not only survive the holidays, but heal and grow through them.

Here are some *grief truths and tools* that will give you a quick road map of where we’re going:

- Holidays are hard. Period.
- This year’s holidays will be different, but they can still be good.
- Alone time is good. Isolation is dangerous.
- For the holidays to go well, you must take your heart seriously.
- You get to choose what you do, when, and with whom.
You’ll need compassionate and safe companions for this journey.

You’re not leaving your loved one behind, but moving on with them in a new way.

Don’t let the holidays use you. Use the holidays to grieve well and love others.

I believe in you. You can do it.

Take a deep breath. Here we go.

I work as a hospice chaplain and bereavement specialist. I am not a Licensed Professional Counselor and none of my content is meant to diagnose or treat any disease or disorder.
“She’s gone now. She was the holiday queen. Everyone is going to expect the usual spectacular meal and celebration. I’m so stressed out.”

Sherry, who lost her mother

WHY ARE HOLIDAYS SO HARD sometimes? The answer is simple: expectations.

We have our own expectations — unspoken plans and desires roaming around in our heads about how things should be. Our expectations often come from the good experiences and fond memories of the past. We have near perfect moments back there when all seemed right with us and the world. It’s only natural to want to recreate that again.

But things never quite work out the way we expect, do they?

It’s been said that most disappointment in
life comes from unmet expectations. If enough of our hopes are dashed, over time the wounds of our heart begin to take over. In order to protect ourselves from further pain, we stop expecting the good. We assume things will be difficult, and we prepare to not get what we need and want.

And of course, everyone around us has their own set of unspoken plans and dreams. Our expectations often bump into theirs. Friction occurs and the results aren’t always pretty.

In addition, we’re continually bombarded by the media-advertising circus whose goal is to redefine and shape our expectations to include their products. This item will make you feel better. That new device will ease your pain. This product will help you forget your losses for a little while. Don’t you want to be like the flawlessly attractive and happy people in our commercial?

Our hearts yearn for a better, less challenging world.

Most of us want holidays to be special, fun, and happy. Mixed into that is our desire to please others and make the day special for them. Expectations are swirling around us on all sides.
Talk about stress! It’s a wonder anyone survives.

On top of all this, holidays automatically remind us of those we’ve lost.

One Sunday afternoon when I was fifteen, my dad had a massive heart attack and collapsed right in front of me. They managed to resuscitate him at the hospital, but he never regained consciousness. For a week I sat by his bed in the Cardiac Care Unit and talked about anything and everything that came into my mind. The only other sound in the room was the constant hum of the ventilator. I knew he wasn’t going to make it.

Since there was no evidence of any brain activity, the doctors finally asked for permission to turn off the machines. My brother was quite a bit older. He nodded. I nodded. I knew dad would never want to live this way. He died several hours later.

I had been living with my dad at the time, just the two of us. It wasn’t a perfect relationship (hey, I was a teenager), but I
loved him. I have such powerful and fond memories of us together. When he died, I felt lost. He had been my home.

A terrific family I had known for years stepped up and took me in. It turned out my dad had sensed something was going to happen to him and had talked with them about me. Even though they already had four kids, they welcomed me in as one of their own. It was wonderful. They helped me heal.

And then December rolled around. I had always loved the Christmas season and I was having a blast with my new family. But when I woke up Christmas morning, I felt incredibly sad. Though I was happier than I had ever been, my heart was also aching. It was Christmas, and my dad wasn’t there. I missed him terribly.

There’s something about holidays that bring up and magnify our losses. We delight in gathering as families, but we’re also keenly aware of those who are missing. Wonderful memories can bring forth both joy and sadness.
Why Holidays Are Hard

I think of feel-good holiday classics like *Miracle on 34th Street, It’s a Wonderful Life,* and *White Christmas.* It’s interesting that the backstories of these films include tragedy, illness, economic disaster, war, death, depression, and the difficulty of aging. Perhaps that’s why they’re classics. They give us hope. They’re about overcoming our losses. Though life is tough, love and goodness can still win out.

Christmas Day 1977 was my first without dad. I’ve had many Christmases without him since. The ache has gotten better, but it’s still there. I’ve gotten used to that hole in my heart and have learned to appreciate it. I miss him. I’m supposed to.

Grieving well is not about getting over your loved one. You don’t get over a person. You learn to get through this time in the healthiest way possible. And that includes Thanksgiving, the Christmas holidays, and all the other special days of the year. Every one of them will remind you of your loss, and that’s okay.
Like those holiday classic movies, many of your special days will be about overcoming. Your goal isn’t to merely survive, but to make holidays work for you in less than ideal circumstances. With the right tools in your grief toolbox, you can create your own holiday classics, year after year.

Managing expectations, both your own and others’, is a good life skill. It’ll be especially important in the holidays following your loss. How can you begin to do that? We’ll talk more about that as we go along.

Holidays can be tough. This year they might be extra hard, but they can also be very good.
THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

• What are your expectations of this holiday — for yourself, for your family, for others?

• What do you think others’ expectations are?
• Which expectations create the most stress for you?

• Which expectations are simply unrealistic for the holidays this year?
Even with my loss, this holiday can still be good. I’ll begin by managing my own and others’ expectations.
“To be honest, I’m nervous. No, I’m scared. It’s like I’m frozen and can’t move. How am I going to face the holidays without him?”

*Tina, who lost her husband*

ONE THING IS CERTAIN: YOUR holidays will be different from now on.

Your holidays will be different because your life has been altered forever. Someone very special to you is missing.

No matter what the holiday, you probably have powerful memories of your loved one associated with it. These wonderful (or sometimes painful) experiences of the past can be triggered in an instant. Potential reminders are everywhere:

- A familiar song,
• A certain food aroma,
• A walk in a familiar place,
• A special movie or show,
• Certain special holiday events,
• Being with good friends you both enjoyed,
• Holiday cards arrive, addressed to just you.

All these remind you of your times together. You can’t get away from them. There’s a trigger around every corner.

The memories flood in. Everywhere you look you see your loved one. You could swear you hear their voice. Perhaps you can almost feel their touch. Then reality crushes in upon you. They’re gone.

Yes, holidays will be different now.

Let me assure you of a few things:

It’s okay to be where you are in the grief process. It is what it is.

You may feel like a mess. That’s not sur-
prising. Your life has turned topsy-turvy. Grief is messy. Holidays are messy.

Maybe you’re more easily irritated. Anger is a part of loss. How could you not be upset?

Perhaps you’re sad or even depressed at times. That’s natural. Are you supposed to be happy and thrilled right now?

You wonder if you’re going crazy. No, you’re just in a crazy situation. It feels like your soul has been ripped apart. Everything has changed.

You seem to be exhausted all the time. Grief exacts a heavy toll on your resources. It’s mentally, emotionally, and physically draining.

You wish you could be stronger, but real strength lies in being real with your own heart. You’re stronger than you know.

You’re forgetting things right and left. Yep, that’s part of grieving too.

So what do you need to do?

Be kind to yourself.
Give yourself more wiggle-room.
Don’t expect as much from yourself (or from others, for that matter).
Work on accepting where you are right now.
You don’t have to like where you’re at currently. In fact, you may hate it. That’s okay. This time is not business-as-usual. Far from it. This is new, uncharted territory. Even if you’ve had other losses, this loss is different. Every loss is unique.

This holiday will be different.

I survived Thanksgiving and Christmas of 1977 without my dad. I survived his birthday earlier that year too. But I thought about him a lot.

The anniversary of his death was terribly hard. I went to the graveside and sat there for what seemed like hours. I thought of all the things I missed about him, and it was a long list. I told him I loved him and wished he was still here.

Not having him at my high school graduation was awful. All my friends were celebrating with their families, and I felt so alone. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough. As I ran across the floor, my dad’s business partner grabbed my arm. “He was so, so proud of you,” he said. I
broke down and wept. Several friends sought me out and surrounded me. My adoptive family came cheering around the corner, smothering me in handshakes and hugs. Graduation was painful, but it was also good.

I missed him at every swim meet (I was a competitive swimmer through college). I kept expecting to hear his whistle. After a race I always looked back and to the left — because that’s where he always was.

I graduated from college. I got married. I graduated from Seminary. I moved to Japan, Hawaii, Washington and then back to Texas. I adopted three little girls from Colombia. There were more milestones along the way and many since then. And more losses as well. Dad wasn’t there for any of them. I missed him every time.

Yes, my heart still aches.

I’m betting your heart aches too. That ache honors your loved one. The grief you feel is part of saying “I love you” to the one you’ve lost.

Being kind to yourself and accepting where you are will be the key to navigating holidays in a healthy manner.

Yes, this holiday will be different, but it can still be good.
THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

• How do you think this holiday will be different because of your loss?

• What do you think you’re going to miss most about your loved one this holiday?
• What are some ways you can be kind to yourself during this time?
My holidays will be different, but they can still be good.
Gary is the co-author (with New York Times Best-seller Cecil Murphey) of Saying Goodbye: Facing the Loss of a Loved One (Harvest House, 2013) and Not Quite Healed: 40 Truths for Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse (Kregel, 2013). Not Quite Healed has been nominated for the 2013 Lime Award for Excellence in Non-Fiction. He is the author of Good Grief, a free web-based grief recovery course available through his website, and also writes inspirational community service columns for several Texas newspapers. Gary writes and speaks from more than 30 years
of ministry experience, including campus ministry, church-planting in Japan, and three pastorates in Texas and Washington. He now serves as a hospice chaplain, writer, and speaker in central Texas. Gary has three adopted Colombian daughters and absolutely loves being a dad.